



**(U) The Bald Truth: Helping Your Leaders Make Decisions that Stick (repost)**

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Run Date: 12/29/2004

*Some practical advice on getting it right the first time. This article ran in March 2004... (U)*

(U) I bet you will agree that we have a problem with revisiting decisions. It seems like every time a decision is announced around here, there is a retraction and a revisit within 24 hrs. Can you relate? I can. Sadly, I have issued plenty of retractions myself. Honestly, many were due to my mistakes -- but others were the result of a faulty decision-making process. Did you ever wonder what causes this and what we could do about it? Never fear, Dr. Berlin has a diagnosis and a prescription.

**(U) The Symptoms and the Disease**

(U) Most leaders have to make decisions in uncertainty. Uncertainty exists in a lack of knowledge of our current state and a murky prediction about the future. Still, leaders have to make decisions anyway -- waiting for perfect information is not a smart thing to do since it never really arrives. We need to make our decisions with some lesser amount of information, somewhere around 70 to 90 percent. But the problem is that we make decisions with way less than 70 percent, and the equation changes from a risk to a gamble somewhere around the 50 percent mark. When the leader feels he is in the gamble region, he is particularly vulnerable to the **nugget virus**. That is, when a single nugget of new information comes in, the leader's confidence in the decision is shaken and a revisit is in the making.

(U) One reason this happens is the way the leader's immune system is suppressed by the **point solution briefing**. Many an outstanding, up and coming, subordinate can craft up an advocacy briefing that spells out the efficacy of **the** answer, the **single** answer. Our culture promotes the point solution briefing because the antibodies to **the** answer will form early if the idea is unpopular to the established status quo, so it is best to keep it quiet and don't even mention the other possibilities lest they spur on the antibodies (I guess I am overdoing the medical analogy a bit, but bear with me). Anyway, I often see great ideas literally sprung on the leadership with no notice. Ever wanting to encourage innovation, our leaders hate to say no to a good idea and the decision is made to go ahead (usually with funding and personnel support to follow - not further specified). As we work out the details, the nuggets begin to arrive and the inevitable revisit takes place. We immediately go into the paralysis-by-analysis mode and everything grinds to a halt. I got the T-shirt on this one.

**(U) The Cure**

(U) Well the first thing is get the good staff work done in the first place (odd that a chief of staff would advocate for this, no?). This means producing the good **options brief** rather than the evil **point solution brief**. The options brief is really an intellectually honest depiction of the many ways to skin this cat. It usually contains, among others, the "do nothing" option, the partial option, the full option, the cheap option, the opposing organization's option and the out of the box option. The idea is to present the landscape of solutions to the decision maker. The options brief lists the criterion by which the leader would judge the decision and evaluates the pros and cons of each option according to the criteria. Criteria could be:

- cheaper,
- faster,
- more efficient,
- supports others, etc.

The result is a matrix of options versus criterion that shows the total picture including resource implications. Please do me a favor: if there is a resource cost, make a well-staffed recommendation as to the source of the resource. It is only half a decision if we identify a need and not the source of satisfaction.

(U) Now, there **is** a place for advocacy here. At the end of the options discussion, you are expected to make a staff recommendation on which of the options you would recommend, being careful to list the pitfalls and risks for each option. It is also important to explain why the decision needs to be made now. The timing of a decision is a legitimate factor in the discussion - especially at the strategic level. Be ready to answer the question, why now? If you are smart and a little bit lucky, your leader will select an option, decide and move on without looking back.

(U) How does this prescription help your leader make sticky decisions? Well, it inoculates the decision maker from the **nugget virus**. With a good view of the landscape, the leader can evaluate the **impact** of the newly arrived nugget. The leader can determine if the new information is significant enough to warrant a legitimate re-look or just an insignificant additional piece of data. The well-staffed options brief keeps your decision maker in the risk regime and out of the gambling casino. Let's eliminate the unnecessary revisit with good staff work.

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